

Winter tills legislative soil to benefit Minnesota

The Minnesota House of Representatives' new majority leader, Rep. Ted Winter (DFL-Fulda), sees a lot of similarity between his role as a party official and his full-time job running the family farm in the southwestern part of the state.

"Farmers have to collect a lot of information," about seed, fertilizers, equipment, and finances to be successful, Winter said, "but there comes a time when you have to get on the tractor seat and plant the corn . . . it's the same thing in the Legislature. Legislators gather a lot of information, but there comes a time when you have to do the deal. You have to put 67 votes up on the board to meet the needs of the people of Minnesota. As majority leader, it's my job to make sure we get that done."

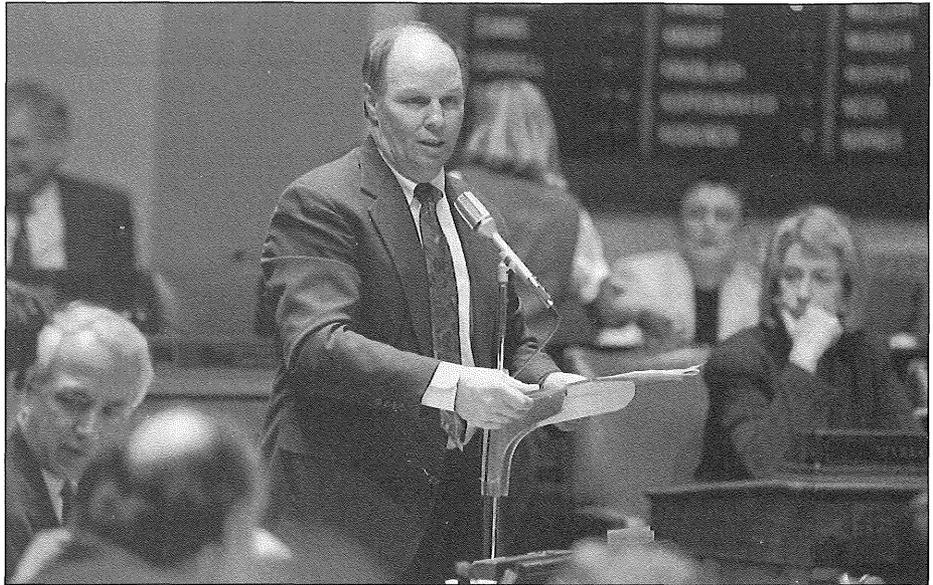
For Winter, 47, now in his sixth term, that job promises to be no small task. Party leaders have set an ambitious agenda for the 80th Session of the Minnesota Legislature, including the removal of current spending caps that would cost Minnesota schools more than \$300 million in funding and reworking the property tax code, a primary source of education dollars. The House also must address changes in the welfare system, in addition to ongoing health care issues and a growing juvenile crime problem that, Winter said, has robbed people of their sense of security.

When the rural voters in District 22A first elected him in 1986, Winter said, nobody worried about becoming the victim of a drive-by shooting. Instead, most of his neighbors were too busy struggling with an expanding morass of debt, the result of skyrocketing interest rates that threatened to bankrupt their farms.

Long before he ever thought of running for office, Winter, along with several of his friends, decided that something had to be done about the burgeoning financial threat. He began organizing the community to take some political action, mobilizing the farmers around the state with the "Groundswell" movement.

Then Gov. Rudy Perpich showed up at one such event and Winter gave him a firsthand account of the farmers' plight. Perpich, who would soon be attending a conference of midwestern governors in Chicago, assured Winter that he would raise the matter there.

"I suggested to him that he should take some farmers with him and he agreed," Winter said, a broad grin playing across his face. A few days later, Winter and a couple of



House Majority Leader Ted Winter sees a lot of similarities between heading the party in the House and running a family farm. "There comes a time when you have to get on the tractor seat and plant the corn . . . it's the same thing in the Legislature. Legislators gather a lot of information, but there comes a time when you have to do the deal. You have to put 67 votes up on the board to meet the needs of the people of Minnesota."

friends, Larry Green and Milan Wiesneski, were on their way to Chicago.

At the conference, Winter listened to a number of plans aimed at helping the struggling farmers, most of which involved the creation of new paperwork. After hours of listening, he decided he had heard enough.

"I stood up and explained to them that the only way it looked like anything would change is if I go after one of their jobs and change things myself," he said. On the way home from a farm rally at the Capitol in St. Paul, Winter seriously discussed the idea of running for office with two friends, Andy Steensma and Norman DeBleck. They decided then and there to do it and all three won election to the House. More than a decade later, Steensma and DeBleck are no longer representatives, but Winter has emerged as one of the DFL's leading policymakers.

Assuming the mantle of House majority leader represents something of a fruition for the affable Winter. When the "Phonagate" scandal of March 1993 forced former Rep. Alan Welle (DFL-Willmar) to resign his majority leader post, House DFLers passed over Winter in favor of Rep. Irv Anderson (DFL-Int'l Falls), whom many perceived to have a more aggressive style of leadership.

Winter maintains it is the political climate that has changed, not his leadership style. The partisanship of days gone by simply

doesn't play in today's era of narrow majorities, he said.

The new speaker of the House, Rep. Phil Carruthers (DFL-Brooklyn Center) agreed with Winter's assessment. Winter, Carruthers said, is perfectly suited to lead in today's Legislature.

"Ted is action-oriented," Carruthers said. "He believes he's in the Legislature for a reason — to get things done. He's a good consensus builder who likes to involve and work with people. The members feel that he's fair, yet he's a strong advocate for his own and the party's position(s)."

Winter characterizes himself as one who leads by serving his fellow representatives, rather than forcing them to adhere to the leadership's agenda. A legislator, he explained, should always feel as if he or she has been heard, and although the job of majority leader is inherently partisan, perhaps his most important responsibility is to impart a sense of participation to the members, be they Republican or Democrat.

"My job is to communicate with people, to listen to them and to work with them — and that includes Republicans — and then to carry that into the arena," Winter said. "It's always been my strength to be a facilitator and to get things done . . . just like a farmer, you'll reap the harvest in the end."

— F.J. Gallagher